



by Wendy Green

Good To Great: Confronting Brutal Facts

In his best-seller, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins studied a group of organizations that had moved from being merely “good” to truly “great,” and that went on to maintain that level for many years. This article is the second in a series examining the principles of *Good to Great*, as seen through the prism of aging services providers who have adopted the *Good to Great* paradigm. See the January/February 2006 *FutureAge* for the first article, “Putting the People on the Bus.”

A crucial part of what makes a great organization, according to Jim Collins, is a clear-eyed willingness to “confront brutal facts”—serious obstacles that must be overcome without delay.

This principle can be difficult for faith-based and mission-driven organizations because it requires an environment in which the most productive discussions often involve disagreement and debate—environments that create a sense of unease for most people.

At CRISTA Senior Ministries, Seattle, Wash., a particularly brutal fact revolved around the culture of the organization. Bob Howell, executive director, was forced to confront the fact that the staff was controlling the schedules, and that addressing that issue could mean losing several employees who had served CRISTA for a long time.

“This occurred when CRISTA was undertaking a culture change that included transitioning to a neighborhood model,” says Howell. “We attempted to assign all nurses and nursing assistants to a neighborhood, and found our efforts hindered by employees placing restrictions on their availability to work.”

Howell’s first step—a prerequisite as defined by Collins—was to gather the appropriate data. “We came to the conclusion that nearly one quarter of our staff were restricting their availability in some way that created a roadblock to the transition. As a result, others were working so much overtime that we were unable to stay within our staffing budget.”

CRISTA identified which employees were not restricting their availability or hours, and assigned those employees to

permanent positions first. Those who worked excessive overtime were given schedules of 40 hours maximum.

CRISTA educated the staff about the financial bottom line cost of current practices, and how that affected residents. This was new to most of them; financial issues had never been discussed so openly with them, and it helped them understand the challenges their actions presented to the organization.

Many employees, however, were initially quite upset, as they had come to depend on overtime pay. Managers spent one-on-one time with those most affected and tried to work out the best schedule within the new guidelines. In some cases, CRISTA attempted to help workers locate a second job. Others began to understand that they were being given a choice and that they did have some control over their roles.

According to Howell, “It was the right direction to take. After enacting the changes, we have noticed many positive changes, both financially and culturally. Staff are bonding in neighborhoods and are taking pride in the areas in which they work. Our overtime and agency costs are lessening month by month. It wasn’t easy, but it was the right call.”

“Blameless Autopsies”

Along with gathering the appropriate data to confront difficult issues, Collins also advocates a climate in which the truth may be heard in the form of “blameless autopsies.”

For Covenant Retirement Communities, Chicago, Ill., this means providing better opportunities for addressing tough issues, and conveying to staff that confrontation

and questioning are OK (and that for leaders they are an art).

Covenant CEO Rick Fisk transformed an existing operations leadership council, which had traditionally served as an information-sharing meeting, to serve as a real platform for discussion and debate. Covenant leaders have identified several brutal facts, including:

- They have a culture that is adverse to strife and conflict.
- CCRCs may not be the model of the future.
- They are tied to bricks and mortar without developing services.
- They need a higher degree of accountability.

Cathy Bergland, chief operating officer of Presbyterian Homes & Services (PHS), St. Paul, Minn., describes “confronting the brutal facts” as one of the most difficult aspects of implementing the *Good to Great* framework. She’s noticed that the level of “safety” in a meeting depends somewhat on who says what to whom, and whether the conversation occurs in a group setting or in a one-on-one meeting. This safety is critical to conducting blameless autopsies, and thus key to confronting the brutal facts.

Bergland offers the following clues to measure the level of safety:

- Does the level of participation change when certain people are, or are not, present for the discussion?
- How defensive are people?
- Does the person who “owns” the issue, i.e., the person with the biggest problem with the issue, raise it first?
- Do people feel that enough time is allotted to talk through an issue?

She also offers tips for creating a safer climate so that truly blameless autopsies may take place:

- Persevere: Confronting difficult issues is tough for those new to the process, and may take a while to get used to.
- Provide equal opportunity autopsies: If possible, try not to focus on one department, issue or person.
- Use those with thick skins as models: Strategically select individuals who are less defensive for the first few discussions, to help others become used to the process.
- Use the label “autopsies without blame”: Simply using the language helps people tame their defensiveness.
- Reinforce the purpose: Remind people of the reason why they’re having the discussion in the first place—to better serve the people who trust them!
- Follow up with individuals later.
- Balance the messages so that not all are negative.

PHS provides one good example of facing brutal facts. As PHS grew from a care center-based, single-site organization to one with 32 sites in three states, it was forced to address its mix of facilities and services. It became clear that PHS would need a different future that retained care-center buildings and services and relied more on housing with services, assisted living and other community-based components. Confronting this brutal fact would mean coping with significant changes to staff structure, board composition and function, and approaches to marketing and resource deployment, not to mention facing weaknesses in the organization’s project development capacity. The results, according to PHS CEO Dan Lindh, have been dramatic and continue to bear fruit as the organization stays focused on ministering in different ways to the needs of older adults.

PHS has become more serious about establishing and holding to performance measures, with related targets and thresholds. The board, senior managers and site

leaders separately identify a set of measures they deem appropriate to monitor performance, and set a target of performance for each measure. Employee satisfaction, for example, is measured through a regular survey. The target score on the key questions is 4.4, but PHS has determined the acceptable range to be between 4.0 and 5.0. If employee satisfaction is below 4.0 at a given site, site leaders begin a six-step problem-solving process, which they must complete until the measures climb back within the acceptable range. PHS calls this the “Closed Loop Corrective Action Plan.”

For the Greater Good

Readers of Collins’ work find that the book provides them a useful common language to address difficult, often touchy issues: “Is she the right person for our bus?” “Perhaps he’s just in the wrong seat.”

This is especially true when it comes to “confronting brutal facts” and conducting “autopsies without blame.” Still, creating the environment necessary for this to happen in a productive way requires people to remove themselves from a perceived comfort zone, open themselves up to criticism and challenge the status quo.

But mission-driven organizations have an edge. An organization’s mission can be used to guide discussion and debate to benefit those the organization serves. As Bergland notes, it’s important to remind people why difficult issues are being addressed in the first place: to better serve those who trust them with their care.

This series will continue in our next issue with a focus on how these organizations identified their “hedgehogs”: the intersection of what they’re passionate about, what they are the best in the world at and what drives their resource/economic engine. 🦔

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